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ABSTRACT

Community-based organizations that worked effectively with urban youth were found to resemble experiential education programs. The finding was remarkable because the organizations did not identify themselves as places where experiential education took place. A study of four organizations examined ways in which they help youth to become more effective change agents, develop a sense of belonging, and foster increased competence. The organizations were: (1) a professional newspaper staffed primarily by youth aged 14-24 which accepts regular contributions from incarcerated youth; (2) a performing arts center with participants spanning several generations and various cultures; (3) health advocates providing services for youth "infected or affected" by the HIV virus and staffed primarily by youth; and (4) a national organization offering many programs to empower girls and women. Beneath the surface, the four organizations share fundamental characteristics with each other and with wilderness-based forms of experiential education. In particular, they emphasize active learning that builds on student experiences and facilitates the processing of experiences to enable a transfer of learning to other areas of daily life. The behavior of both staff and youth reflect organizational values. The differences between community-based and wilderness-based programs are discussed as a basis for collaboration. (SV)

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Experiential Education in Urban Community-Based Organizations

Rebecca Carver

The research project on which this monograph is based began with an extensive literature review of experiential education theory and practice, a pilot study of a ropes course, and supplemental field work in a variety of other areas of experiential education. A preliminary conceptual framework for thinking about experiential education was then constructed. It has since been refined to reflect the findings of a multiple case study of experiential education in urban settings.[1] There was a remarkable resemblance between the key characteristics of experiential education that emerged from the early stages of this study and the key characteristics of community-based organizations (CBOs) that are effective at engaging urban youth. It is "remarkable" because the urban community-based organizations do not identify themselves as places where experiential education takes place. The research findings presented here are based on an investigation of how these urban community-based organizations implement the pedagogical principles of experiential education and achieve success both in terms of promoting youth development and achieving goals of experiential education.

After a lengthy process of preliminary site visits, interviews and getting referrals from knowledgeable sources, four sites were selected from a group of over 100 potential sites. The research sites include a center for performing arts, a youth-run newspaper, an organization devoted to empowering girls and young women, and an organization that serves youth who are "infected or affected" by the HIV virus. Data collection methods included formal and informal interviews with youth and staff, observances of formal sessions and informal activities at the organizations, and reviews of documents and products from the organizations.

The study investigated the use of experiential education in the four urban community-based organizations as a means of (a) assisting youth to become more effective change agents in their lives and communities, (b) nurturing the development of a sense of belonging among youth, and (c) fostering the development of youth's competence in a range of areas youth perceive as relevant to core elements of their lives. In other words, it addresses ways in which organizations allow youth to develop personal agency, a sense of belonging, and increased competence.[2]

Referred to by their pseudonyms, here is what the four research sites look like on the surface. Write On! is a professional newspaper primarily staffed by youth who are 14-24 years of age. Most of the staff come to the office on a regular basis to submit their work and discuss issues that are covered by the paper. Regular contributions to the paper are also made by youth who are being held in custody while awaiting a trial or serving time for a crime after being convicted. While incarcerated, some of these youth attend writing workshops that are run by a young woman who is a journalist and editor at the paper.

At Mosaic Center for Performing Arts, dance pieces, music, theatrical performances, and videos are produced, practiced, taught, and learned. The participant population spans several generations and is representative of several ethnic cultures. People come together from different backgrounds to form ensembles and take classes.

Youth Health Advocates provides services for all youth who are "infected or affected" by the HIV virus and is primarily staffed by youth. Workshops are held, educational programs are run, and youth are trained as political lobbyists and public speakers to ensure their voices are heard clearly in their local communities, at the state level of politics, and in national debates.

The National Organization for Female Youth offers a range of programs designed to empower girls and young women. These programs include leadership training, mentoring, support group meetings, and opportunities for youth to develop skills in mathematics, science, and sports. Youth are given the opportunity to participate in field trips that takes them out of their neighborhood to take a workshop at a women-owned business or participate in a program held on a women's college campus.

Beneath the surface, the four organizations share fundamental characteristics with more classic forms of experiential education such as Outward Bound. In each case, there is an emphasis on active learning that builds on students' experiences and facilitates the processing of experiences such that participants are able to form understandings of how to take lessons from their participation and apply them in other areas of their lives. The day-to-day behavior of staff and youth reflect the valuing of compassion, communication, critical thinking and creativity, respect for self and other, responsibility and accountability. These values dictate how activities are run, how disputes are resolved, what rules are in place, and how the organizations are managed.

There are differences between experiential education in the urban community-based organizations and experiential education in wilderness-based adventure. First, the authenticity of activities is grounded in the every-day life experiences of youth rather than being grounded in the experiences that participants have while on a course. In the urban community-based organizations in this study, staff draw heavily on the experiences that youth bring with them to the organizations. For instance, a staff member may encourage and support a journalist at Write On! to work on a story about the foster care system because the journalist has been in several foster homes. In both the urban and wilderness settings, learning is meaningful to participants because it is intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and socially engaging and results in the satisfaction of having gained wisdom, knowledge, or skills that are of value to participants. In the urban setting, participants are not removed from their regular environment thus the learning is more directly related to other areas of their lives.

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In short, staff at the urban community-based organizations serve as experiential educators by:

- consciously integrating the life experiences of youth into the curriculum;
- cultivating learning environments in which youth are enabled and encouraged to develop intellectually, socially, emotionally and physically;
- working with youth as members of a learning community;
- employing the pedagogical principles of Drawing on Experience, Authenticity, Active Learning, and Connecting to the Future;[2]
- providing opportunities for youth and staff to reflect on their processes of interaction and learning;
- showing a commitment to benefiting both individual youth and the societies of which they are members; and
- demonstrating the valuing of caring, compassion, inclusivity, individuality, critical thinking, and communication.

Urban community-based organizations that are most successful at fostering the development of youth agency, belonging, and competence tend to be places where youth are members for long periods of time, often participating in activities over the course of several years.[3] This fact allows them an advantage over programs that last only a couple of weeks. On the other hand, the CBOs are often lacking in resources to provide some of the wonderful activities sponsored by wilderness-based adventure organizations. Therein lies a foundation for successful collaboration between urban CBOs and wilderness-based experiential education programs that could capitalize on the strengths of their differences.

When thinking about experiential education in urban community-based organizations, it can be helpful to look for the subtle counterparts to what might be blatantly obvious in the wilderness setting. For instance, on a wilderness course, instructors provide participants with opportunities to learn how to become responsible. The backdrop is often dramatic. Participants may learn how to belay each other when rock climbing or take care of each other in the event of an injurious accident. Creating structured opportunities for youth to take responsibility in urban settings is a more allusive art form. It is not enough to tell kids that they can take initiative; staff work hard behind the scenes to facilitate the processes that youth undertake to explore how they can take responsibility, and to learn from failures as well as successes.

In the wilderness setting, experiential educators provide opportunities for participants to experience a positive struggle — one which is challenging and can result in participants feeling successful and proud of their accomplishments. Instructors may introduce group problem solving activities or lead participants on a challenging expedition. Again, the backdrop is often dramatic — a stretch of river with powerful rapids, or a mountain peak that a group will ascend. In the urban setting, staff work with the struggles that youth face in their everyday lives. Youth at the organizations in this study include high school drop-outs, convicted juvenile offenders, teenagers who are HIV positive, kids who have lived on the streets and in homeless shelters, young people who were physically and sexually abused, and youth who face a daily threat of violence, hunger, drug addiction, unwanted pregnancy, and or feelings of helplessness and isolation. A role of staff at the urban CBOs where experiential education prevails is to find and create positive aspects of the struggles these youth face; for example, in the outdoor setting, finding the positive in the struggle of being soaked by rain or a river. Staff facilitate the processes youth undertake to face their personal challenges and make sense of their struggles in a manner that allows youth to come to terms with some of the traumatic situations they have endured and feel a sense of accomplishment, inner-strength, and pride. Here too, the backdrop is often dramatic.

1. A more extensive write up of this research can be found in Education for All: From Experience, Through Guidance and Reflection, a doctoral dissertation by Rebecca Carver, published by Stanford University, 1998.
2. See Theory For Practice: A Framework for Thinking about Experiential Education (Carver, 1996) in the Journal for Experiential Education (19:1).
3. McLaughlin, M. W., Irby, M. A., & Langman, J. (1994). Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. McLaughlin, M. W., & Heath, S. B., Research Directors; Merita Irby, Producer/Writer (1993). Listen Up! (an audiovisual tape) Stanford: Stanford University.

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